

SELECT BOARD

Fiscal Year 2004

Two thousand four, like most years in Amherst, was a year of challenges, hard work, and progress. Transition was a theme that affected most issues the Board grappled with.

Early in the fiscal year, widespread anxiety prevailed about the ongoing state of Amherst finances, especially in view of the reduction of state and federal municipal support. Many people deeply involved in Town government worried about the depletion of Town reserves and the impact of shortfalls on the ability to cover anticipated increases in fixed and mandated costs, and to fund some positions and services into the next year or two. For several years there had been discussion about the need for an override of Proposition 2 1/2 to allow a higher than usual increase in property tax rates in Amherst.

The majority of the Select Board voted to place a “pyramid” override question (for a \$2 million or a \$2.5 million amount) on the March 30th ballot in the Annual Town Election instead of waiting until after the Town Meeting when most overrides are decided. The minority proposed that the decision on the need or size of an override be made later in the course of the state legislature's budget process when better information on municipal allocations would be available.

In the election, a \$2 million override of Proposition 2 ½ passed by 89 votes, 2258 to 2169. The \$2.5 million override did not pass. All members of the Select Board, the School Committees, and the Finance Committee expressed their appreciation to voters. The passage of the override eased the budget process during Town Meeting. At the end of the fiscal year, it appeared that state revenues might increase and the community continued to be divided as to the need for the full amount of the override.

In a special election in October 2003, Robie Hubley was elected to fill the vacancy on the Select Board that had been created by the resignation of Eddy Goldberg in March 2003.

In the Annual Town Election, on March 30, 2004, Robie Hubley was re-elected, and Gerry Weiss was elected to replace Dolly Jolly, who chose not to run after serving two terms. When the new Board convened, Anne Awad was elected Chair; Robie Hubley, Vice-Chair; and Gerry Weiss, Clerk.

Reforms initiated by a Town Meeting Improvement Committee were implemented with positive results for Annual Town Meeting. In a busy session, 40 articles were considered. A proposal for major replacement of downtown sidewalks and new sidewalks, funded by \$1.2 million in borrowing, had been defeated by the fall 2003 Town Meeting. The plan was brought forward again in the spring Town Meeting. The proposal was defeated again when a number of advocates for the disabled and elderly noted that the design was flawed and the new sidewalks would be difficult to navigate and there were concerns about borrowing for what should be regular maintenance. Town Meeting adopted a substitute motion, calling for a redesigned and phased sidewalk program, borrowing no more than \$250,000 in the first year, and funded thereafter, as far as possible, with capital or operational money. In June, the Select Board held a public hearing to invite public comment on design and priorities to assist the Department of Public Works to develop an implementation plan.

In another action, the annual Town Meeting authorized the Select Board to accept the property between North Pleasant Street, East Pleasant Street and Triangle Street to be known as Kendrick Park, and to remove the last remaining house on the property in accordance with their best judgment. It is hoped that the house will be sold and moved, rather than demolished.

In December 2003, the Board reopened the Town Manager's contract at his request. On a 3-2 vote, the Select Board approved a new three-year contract retroactive to July 1, 2003 and with a major increase in salary. The majority cited the Manager's performance, experience and increased responsibilities. The minority opposed reopening a contract that was not due for re-negotiation until July 2004 and granting a retroactive pay increase. They held that it was inappropriate to grant a significant raise to the Town Manager before negotiating a new contract when it was unclear if money would be available to fund existing services, and when the Town would be negotiating contracts for school and Town union employees. The Manager indicated that it would be his last contract and that he would be retiring in June 2006.

In a celebratory atmosphere, on May 17, 2004 – the day on which the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's ruling affirming the constitutionality of same-sex marriage went into effect – applicants for same-sex marriage were welcomed to Town Hall and granted marriage licenses.

The Town continued securing key farmland parcels into the state Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program. Credit goes, as usual, to the patient efforts of Pete Westover, who worked on three key parcels. The state granted APR funding for the East Village (Hess) Farm, a genuine accomplishment, especially considering the state of Massachusetts' finances. To secure the agreement, the Town used Community Preservation Act funds of \$192,500, Valley Land Fund and the Kestrel Trust each contributed \$4,000, and private donations of \$22,000 were raised.

In November 2003, the Board approved a state-authorized early retirement benefit that helped with the FY 05 budget dilemmas but occasioned the loss of more than twenty employees, including a number of Department Heads and staff. The Board wishes to express its gratitude and congratulations to (alphabetically): Norma Lynch, Treasurer/Collector; Nancy Maglione, Director of Administration and Finance; Ned Markert, Maintenance Director; Pete Westover, Director of Conservation Services; and Kay Zlogar, Human Resources. The Select Board also expresses gratitude and best wishes to Bob Mitchell, Director of Planning, and John Clobridge, Director of Senior Services, who resigned later in the year.

Town government will be reshaped as we move forward to recruitment of seven department heads. For the Town, the search for and the transition to this new leadership team will demand cooperation, good judgment and support from staff and elected officials.